



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Turkey

Thursday, June 27, 2019
10:30 AM – 12:00 PM
216 Hart Senate Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Vice Chair Manchin. American citizens have also been impacted by deteriorating conditions. Many of you will be familiar with the cases of Pastor Andrew Brunson, who we are very grateful has agreed to testify here today, and NASA scientist Serkan Gölge, who was released last month after having been unjustly imprisoned for more than two years.

Pastor Brunson lived in Izmir, Turkey, for 23 years, where he led a small Protestant congregation. In the wake of the failed coup attempt, authorities detained Pastor Brunson in October 2016 and falsely accused him of membership in a terrorist organization. He was held for more than a year without charges, and when he was eventually indicted, he was falsely accused of, among other things, trying to bring about the creation of an independent state of Kurdistan through the Christianization of Turkey's ethnic Kurdish population.

USCIRF actively advocated for Pastor Brunson throughout his ordeal, and highlighted his plight through the Commission's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. In October 2017, I visited Pastor Brunson in what was the first non-family, non-consular delegation to meet with him—and USCIRF attended three of his subsequent court hearings throughout 2018. In fact, Chair Perkins was present for his release and accompanied Pastor Brunson and his wife Norine on their long-awaited flight back home to the United States. Despite his release, however, the court still found Pastor Brunson guilty.

In regard to the ongoing imprisonment of Americans in Turkey, the U.S. Senate recently introduced bipartisan legislation, S. 1075, that seeks to address the political prosecution of U.S. citizens and diplomatic staff who still remain arbitrarily detained.

On behalf of USCIRF, I look forward to hearing witnesses' testimony and recommendations, including what steps the United States and Congress can take to encourage Turkey to reverse its downward trajectory on freedom of religion or belief.

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